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T A U N T O N :

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VINDICATION

OF

SPEAKING OPENLY

IN FAVOUR OF

IMPORTANT TRUTHS.

IT is feldom that any one can freely canvass prevailing popular opinions upon religious questions, without meeting with many censurers. In the present day, there are few who are obliged to encounter more reproach for maintaining their sentiments than those who openly attack the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine has been received so many years, as a fundamental point, and is so generally considered as a corner stone in the Christian scheme, that it is not wonderful if there be some who feel a resentment towards the opposers of it, similar to that which the Catholics expressed, at the time of the Reformation, against those who controverted the popular opinions of that period. Nor can we be surprized that the more timid and cautious among those who are not enemies to Unitarian sentiments, should be so much hurt by the

warmth of their Trinitarian neighbours, as to be ready to condemn such as give occasion to it, by being more open than themselves. My present object is to soften the temper of the former, and to rectify the misconceptions of the latter.

1. First, I would say a few words to those who are angry with persons that oppose their opinions, and wish to have them punished.

It is with the sincerest pity, brethren, that I reflect upon the unhappy state of your minds. I would entreat you to consider, whether your spirit be the spirit of the Lord Jesus. Did he express any bitterness towards his enemies? Did he say, that they deserved to be punished for their unbelief? Did he direct his disciples, when they should get the civil power into their hands, to compel men to believe in him by force of arms, or to inflict corporal severities upon those who did not hold the true faith? You know that nothing of this kind is to be met with in the scriptures. If then the creed of Unitarians appear to you as opposite to the truth as possible, you have no right to punish them for it. It is utterly contrary to the spirit of the gospel to do so. You recollect, no doubt, how the disciples, James and John, addressed their master, when he was rejected by some Samaritans—"Lord wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, even as Elias did?" I trust you will recollect his answer likewise. "He
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turned and rebuked them and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of: for the son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them," Luke ix. 54—56. You will observe, brethren, that our great Lord did not merely object to the proposal of calling fire from heaven, but rebuked them for the *spirit* they discovered.— And if such a spirit towards even his enemies were displeasing to him, how can you avoid perceiving, that he must highly disapprove of the same spirit, when it has for its object those who profess to be his friends and followers? Be persuaded to reflect upon these things. If you will do so; I am sure you must begin to put away from you all "bitterness, and wrath, and clamour, and evil-speaking, and malice," and return in time to a better temper.

2. Secondly, I beg leave to suggest a few considerations to those, who, though they do not approve of many of the commonly received opinions, think it is best to say nothing upon the subject, and to let the people quietly enjoy their sentiments, without attempting to convince them of their errors.

The doctrine of the Trinity, and other doctrines, are maintained by the church, and is does not look well (you say) to oppose the church. Let me ask you, my friends, do you think that all the doctrines of the church are true or not? Do you think the

Nicene and Athanasian creeds were the creeds of Jesus and his apostles? Do you think that the offices of the Book of Common Prayer are agreeable to the scripture models? I know you will answer in the negative. And can you think that the doctrines, the creeds, the prayers of the church are repugnant to reason and the Bible, and yet ought not to be objected to? What would have been the case, had Jesus and his apostles never opposed the errors of the Jews and Heathens? What would have been the case had the reformers never opposed the errors of the Roman church? The reformers, you know, were not divinely commissioned to canvass the doctrines of the church of Rome, any more than we are to canvass the doctrines of the church of England. Nor were they more supported by the voice of the generality of Christians.—Christians of the western world were, as commonly, Roman Catholics then, as they are Trinitarians now. The church of Rome, too, was a much older and more numerous church than the church of England is. And yet I am sure we must all approve the conduct of the reformers, in speaking against the doctrines of that church. For the same reason ought not we to speak against the false doctrines of the church of England? Consider, my brethren, that error is hurtful, and therefore ought to be opposed. The doctrine of the Trinity, and the religious adoration of Jesus, are errors of great magnitude, and therefore

fore ought to be opposed with a steady and determined zeal.

But perhaps you will object that men are so irritated by an opposition to the doctrines they have venerated from their infancy, that for the sake of peace it is right to let them remain undisturbed.— On the other hand, it should be considered, that if men be so tenacious of their errors, so violent in maintaining them, there is the greater need of our stepping forward—of our uniting all our strength to root them up. It is high time for us to “contend earnestly”—but yet with meekness and Christian love—“for the faith which was once delivered to the saints.”

There was ground for apprehending much more unpleasant consequences from the first promulgation of Christianity, than any which there is the least prospect of arising from the publication of unpopular doctrines in the present day, and yet it appears from the scripture history that our great Lord was not in the least discouraged from speaking freely, or from charging his apostles to do the same. “Think not, (said he, when speaking of the evils of which the preaching of his gospel would be the innocent occasion) think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against

against the mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household." Matt. x. 34, &c.— But did he mention this in order to discourage his apostles from maintaining the truth? Far otherwise. He mentioned it in order to prepare their minds to meet the consequences of their conduct: charging them at the same time not to be terrified from bearing testimony to him. "He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me." "What I tell you in darkness (says he, in the same discourse) that speak ye in light, and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the house-tops." Matt. x. 27. and 37. You perceive, then, that the prospect of those temporary evils, which would attend the promulgation of the truth (evils much greater than any which can arise in the present day), did not deter our Lord from encouraging the greatest openness. Why then should a consideration of the probability of smaller inconveniences have so much weight upon our minds? Why should it induce us to pursue a course of conduct the very reverse of what he pursued himself and enjoined upon his followers?

There is another view of the subject, which appears to me decisive, in favour of speaking openly against prevailing errors, whatever be the immediate consequences of our conduct. If you look
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upon any doctrine to be *false*, you are firmly persuaded, I apprehend, that the time *will come*, when it will be rejected, and the truth will be received in its place. You are likewise persuaded, I conceive, that this change will be effected, not by a miracle, but according to the usual course of nature, that is, by means of free enquiry and debate. But if there be enquiry and debate; there must be some one to start the enquiry—there must be some one to support the debate, by opposing the prevailing error. But do you imagine, my friends, that human nature will be ever so much changed, as to be no longer influenced by prejudice? Do you think that the time will ever come, when men will calmly and patiently behold what they call the venerable doctrines of their fore-fathers attacked and demolished? Do you imagine that the firmest and most inveterate habits of the human mind will be rooted up, before their mode of thinking upon this or that particular point is changed? If not; then the publication and support of the truth will probably give similar offence at *any future period*, which it will at *present*: and as you grant that the truth *must* one day prevail, the evils attending the first publication of it *must* at some time exist.—And if at *some time*; why not *now*? If the truth be of any value; let us endeavour to make the value of it felt as *soon* as possible. The sooner we surmount the obstacles to the triumph of truth, the
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sooner shall we experience the benign influences of her reign.

Here perhaps it will be suggested, that still no man is under any necessity of being in haste—that perceiving (as some may) how soon the friends of long established creeds are inflamed, it is better to wait awhile—that, in the course of a few years, they may be softened down and become more open to the truth—and that, at any rate, one can but encounter the same inconveniences then, which there is a certainty of meeting with at present. Be it granted. (for the sake of argument) that, in the course of a few years, the world will be more prepared to receive what is looked upon as perfectly novel doctrine than at present, still a man has another question to ask himself: Shall I be sensible of it when it is so, and shall I then feel myself disposed to be perfectly open? Now if a person will deal ingenuously with himself, I am persuaded he will answer one or both of these questions in the negative. We are all aware of the power of habit: we know how exceedingly difficult it is to change any particular mode of thinking, or course of conduct, to which one has been long habituated. It oftentimes remains long after the original cause of it has ceased to exist. Can we imagine then that the *habit of reserve* is different from all other habits, and to be changed at pleasure? We may indeed say to ourselves, I will be cautious

cautious and reserved so long, and then I will be open and undisguised. But in so saying we only show our ignorance of our own weakness: the expectation is altogether vain: it is contrary to all appearances to imagine it can ever be realized. It is founded on the same mistaken principles as the plan of those unhappy men who unreluctantly lead a life of wickedness, through the vain intention of repenting in old age: a plan, the former part of which only is executed, because as sin becomes habitual, men, in general, almost lose the power to reform. In like manner, those who set out in life with extreme caution and reservedness are seldom known to change their conduct in this particular: and one ought to pay them the compliment to suppose that at first they did intend to be at some future period more plain and open. They have either thought that the "more convenient season" has never arrived, or the habit of caution has become so fixed that they have not had sufficient resolution to break through it. Indeed it is peculiarly improbable that this habit should lose strength with years, since most men grow cautious as they grow old, and even those who were perfectly open in the earliest part of life, have been known to become reserved as they have advanced in years. It is not therefore to be wondered at, if those who sat out with great caution have left some of their connections as much the slaves of prejudice

prejudice as they found them—and others in that state of indifference to truth, which is of all states the most unfavourable to the spread of religious knowledge.

And indeed, after all, I cannot imagine that the outcry which the friends of opinions of long standing are always wont to raise, when their errors are attacked, is so great an evil as you seem to consider it. The clamour of a few over-heated, though well-meaning, persons, cannot fail of exciting the attention of others: attention leads to enquiry: and enquiry must always prove, upon the whole, favourable to the truth.

If you carefully attend to the considerations which have been now suggested to you; I am persuaded you will cease to be under any apprehensions for the consequences of speaking or writing unreservedly in favour of the truth. Let us never, then, be “ashamed of the gospel of Christ,” of the pure, primitive gospel of Christ, “for it is the power of God unto salvation.”

I cannot conclude without quoting a passage from an excellent ordination sermon, preached at Kendal, in the year 1756, which I should rejoice to see reprinted, and more extensively circulated. “I will embrace this opportunity (says the preacher) of publicly declaring my great dislike of all temporizing methods, of all ambiguous or evasive expressions, in the conversation or discourses of ministers.

ministers. That a proper regard ought to be had to the different tempers and capacities of those whom we are to instruct, is beyond all question ; as also that we should express ourselves in such terms (truth and a good conscience being safe) as may be the least apt to give offence. Prudence and benevolence require this at our hands. But we are by no means authorized to deliver our sentiments upon any subject in so equivocal a manner, that two persons of directly contrary opinions may both apprehend we are on their side of the question. Is it no more than honest prudence to express ourselves in such terms, as that when we are attacked by one party, we can show they are capable of a very unobnoxious meaning, if not of one favourable to their scheme ; and when called upon by another to explain them, make them bear a quite different sense ? What is this but dissimulation and falsehood ? At least is it not such mean shuffling and tricking in religion, as none of common honesty can practise and approve of ? Whatever seeming present advantage may attend such a proceeding, no good can come of it in the issue. 'Tis *deceiving and being deceived*. 2 Tim. iii. 30. The laity should consider a spirit of free enquiry both amongst themselves and their ministers as their greatest glory and privilege, and not expect to be soothed and confirmed in all their particular notions ; and ministers should express, both in public and private, their

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perfect abhorrence of every thing bordering upon equivocation and trimming." The Reasonableness and Advantage of allowing Ministers to deliver their Sentiments with Freedom; represented in a Sermon, preached at the Ordination of Mr. Caleb Rotheram, by S. Lowthion, p. 56.

" If your ministers be men of sense (says a great writer), and have any knowledge of human nature, they will not trouble you from the pulpit with speculations into which you cannot enter, or the discussion of questions that are nor of some importance to our common Christianity. But you may easily suppose, that, giving more attention to speculative religion, than you have leisure to do, they may see the importance of certain articles in a stronger light than you will at first be aware of; and that will justify them to themselves, and ought to justify them to you, if they propose those articles with such evidence as strikes their minds in their favour, and with a zeal which they may think they deserve. It is indeed their duty, in the sight of God to inculcate, upon you, whatever they shall think to be of importance to you, as members of Christian societies, whether you receive it well or ill.

" There are some errors of a speculative nature, such as those respecting the unity of God and the equity of his moral government, which have taken deep root among common Christians, and which
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are perpetually inculcated from other pulpits, with respect to which it becomes us to oppose zeal to zeal, and every man, who has *ears to hear*, should be called upon to *bear and understand* : because every man who has ears to hear, and the most common understanding may be made to see the absurdity and mischievous consequences of such doctrines.— The minds, therefore, of the commonest people ought to be enlightened, and their zeal excited with respect to them. Let it appear that we, as well as others, despise what we think to be despicable, and abhor what we think to be shocking.”

The sum of what has been offered ; the advantages and influence of the conduct, which we have recommended and urged, are represented, with fulness and force in the following paragraphs of a worthy man ; who, in a striking manner, acted upon these principles*.

* The preface of the Rev. John Seddon, of Manchester, to a tract of the Rev. Thomas Dixon, of Bolton, on “The Sovereignty of the Divine Administration.” p. 7. The conduct of Mr. Seddon, to which there is a reference above, was the particular and explicit declaration of his sentiments concerning the person of Christ, in a series of discourses, delivered some years before his death : when the opinion concerning the proper humanity of our Saviour had not been so openly avowed, nor so fully discussed, as it has of late. The novelty of the sentiment, and the very ingenuous and candid manner in which it was advanced, and the earnestness with which the preacher delivered himself, caused these discourses

“ One important end of life, is *to bear witness of the truth*. A just representation of the doctrine of Christ would cut down all spiritual tyranny, put an end to all fierce contentions, dispel the groveling, debasing sentiments of superstition, introduce universal harmony and love, and greatly promote true piety and substantial virtue; and such as perceive the falshood and evil tendency of any principles, that have been received for Christian doctrines, would do well to bear a steady, free and open testimony against them; nor can any thing but imposture take offence at such conduct. A greater service cannot be rendered to the important cause of truth and virtue, than by separating Christianity from the absurdities and superstitions which weak and ignorant, or wicked and designing men, have mixed with it. All objections would then vanish, and it would satisfy the reason of all attentive, well-disposed persons.

“ In these days of freedom, the Divine Providence affords the opportunity for doing this justice to the gospel; and it must be highly agreeable to

to be very much talked of. Mr. Seddon expressed, on his dying bed, great satisfaction in the review of this instance of his ministerial faithfulness, and upright avowal of what he considered to be divine truth. It is understood, that he desired the discourses might be published, and it is hoped, that though many years have elapsed since they were preached, that they may yet see the light.

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such as sincerely wish well to the glorious cause of truth and liberty, rational religion, and genuine Christianity, that the opportunity is not altogether neglected. The noble attempt is made. The learned friends of mankind are exerting themselves to this important purpose; and though they may be treated with obloquy, have their characters aspersed, and their endeavours counteracted by the rash, ignorant, uncharitable sons of bigotry and blind zeal, or the devotees of pride, ambition, and worldly policy, posterity will discern the importance of what they have done, reap the benefit of it, and bless their memories. May they steadily go on and prosper; not ceasing to exert their best abilities in this glorious service; till the *heap of rubbish*, under which Christian truth has been so long buried, be entirely cleared away, and the precious jewel shew itself before the eyes of mankind in all its native brilliance and splendor."

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THE END.

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